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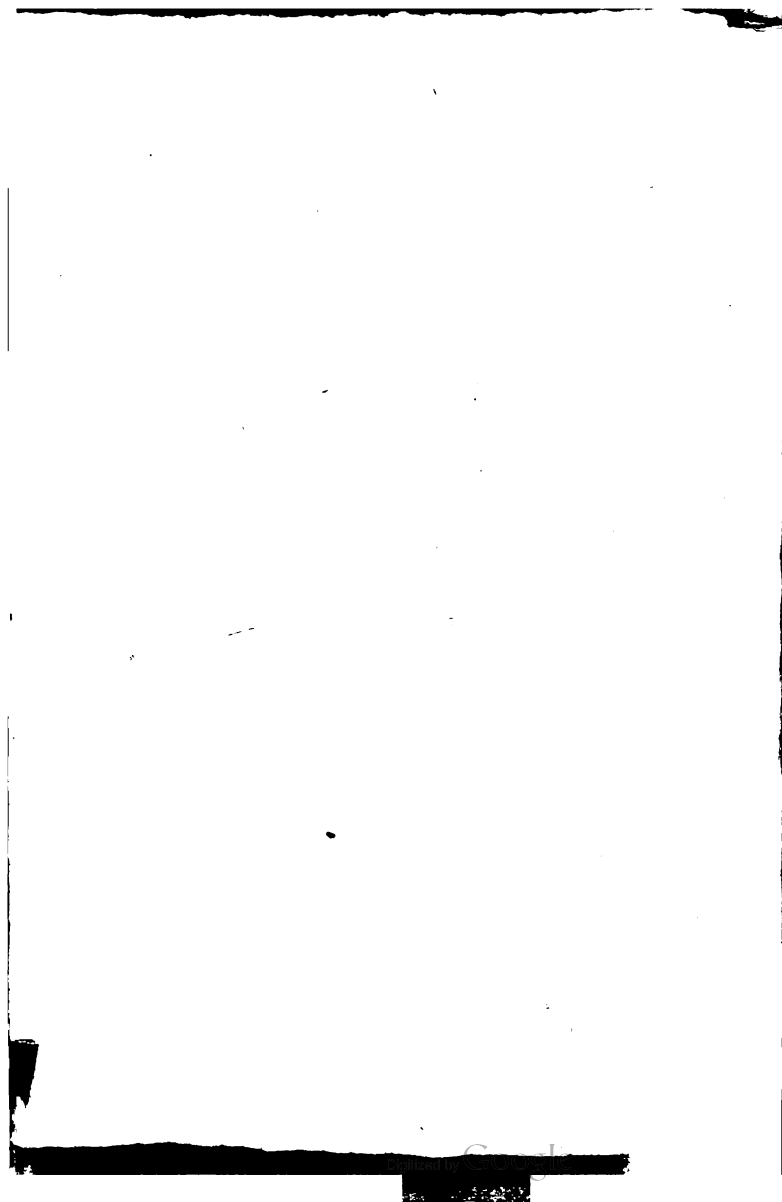
FRANCESCO D'ASSISI
SERMON TO THE BIRDS

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THE SERMON TO THE BIRDS
AND THE WOLF OF GUBBIO

*Privately Printed
at Christmas*

1898



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THE SERMON TO THE BIRDS AND THE WOLF OF GUBBIO

Being part of the XVI. Chapter and the entire
XXI. Chapter of the

FIORETTI DI SAN FRANCESCO *d'Assisi.*



CHRISTMAS 1898



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FROM THE SERMON TO
THE BIRDS

• • • • •
HE passed thence, between Can-
naio and Bevagno. And pass-
ing along, and still aglow, he lifted
his eyes, and saw some trees close to
the road, and in their branches an al-
most infinite number of birds, so that
Saint Francis, marvelling, said to his
companions : " Await me here in the
road, for I will go preach to my sis-
ters the birds ! " And he entered
the fields, and began forthwith to
preach to those birds who were on
the ground ; and of a sudden, those
above him, in the trees, flocked down
to him ; and all of them together
kept quite still, until Saint Francis
ended ; and even then they would

not disperse, until he had given them his blessing. According to what Brother Maximus afterwards told Brother James of Massa, Saint Francis went in among them, letting his cloak brush them, and no one of them moved away. Now the substance of Saint Francis' sermon was this :



“My little sisters the birds, much are ye beholden unto GOD your Maker, and ever and everywhere ought ye to praise Him ; for He gave your liberty to fly over the world, and gave your double and triple raiment. And afterwards He kept your race alive in the Ark of Noah, that it might not perish. And, too, ye are beholden unto Him for that element of air which He hath allotted you, and for your need there neither to sow nor to reap ; but GOD feedeth you, and provideth streams and

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springs, that you may drink, and hill
and vale for your hermitage, and tall
trees wherein to build your nests.
And because ye know not how to
weave nor spin, God clothes you
— you and your young children.
Greatly hath your Creator loved you,
to show you so many mercies ! And
therefore, my little sisters, see that ye
fall not into the sin of thanklessness,
but be it your perpetual care to extol
the LORD.”



As Saint Francis spake these words
to them, all those many, many birds
began to open their beaks, and preen
their necks, and shake out their wings,
and respectfully dip down their bright
heads to the ground, and by their
motions, and their music, to prove
that the holy Father was giving them
the utmost delight. And indeed Saint
Francis was as pleased as they, and

rejoiced together with them, and was wonderstruck at such a multitude of birds, in their most beautiful variety, and at their intimacy with him and attentiveness to him ; for all of which he devoutly praised the Creator in them. And at the very end of his sermon, Saint Francis made the sign of the Cross over them, and gave them leave to depart. Then the birds rose into the air, with an exquisite singing ; and following the lines of the sign of the Cross which Saint Francis had made over them, they divided themselves into four companies : one flying towards the east, and one towards the west, and one southward, and one into the north wind, every band going its way with that exquisite singing. For hereby they symbolized that even as Saint Francis, the standard-bearer of CHRIST's Cross, had made over them the sign, according to which they dis-

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persed to the four corners of the earth, so the preaching of the Cross of CHRIST, renewed by Saint Francis, should by him and by his friars be borne all over the world; and that the brethren, like the birds, possessing in life nothing of their own, should commit their way solely to the Providence of God.



THE WOLF OF GUBBIO

DURING the time that Saint Francis dwelt in the city of Gubbio, there appeared in the neighborhood a big wolf, fierce and terrible, a devourer not of other animals merely, but of men; and all the inhabitants stood in mortal dread of him, because often he had been seen

very near the town. So whoever had occasion to go out of it went armed, quite as if he were bound for the wars ; and yet it was useless to hope to defend one's self, if one met that wolf alone. Indeed, the fear of him went to such lengths that finally none dared leave the city. But Saint Francis, pitying the people, proposed to seek the wolf, despite all their outcry against his doing so ; and making the sign of the most holy Cross, he started for the open country, he and his companions, putting all his trust in GOD. And because, presently, the others hesitated to set foot farther, Saint Francis took his way alone towards the place where the wolf was known to be. And lo ! angered at the sight of so many men, who were hanging behind Saint Francis in the hope to witness a miracle, the wolf ran straight at him with open mouth.

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But still advancing, Saint Francis signed him with the Cross, and called him, saying: "Come to me, my Brother Wolf: I command thee, in the name of CHRIST, to hurt not me, nor any one." And oh! the wonder of it! The moment that Saint Francis signed him with the Cross, the terrible wolf closed his jaws and stopped running; and, as he heard what was said to him, came up gently as any lamb, and threw himself down at the feet of Saint Francis, and there lay. Then Saint Francis began to talk to him: "My Brother Wolf, great damage hast thou wrought in these parts, and great mischief, by thy persecution of God's creatures without His leave: not only dost thou kill and devour cattle, but thou hast ventured to destroy the human kind, made in the image of God; for which deed thou art accounted worthy of the gallows, like a

wretched thief and murderer. Now, every person hereabout complains of thee, and accuses thee, and the whole countryside is hostile towards thee. But I am fain, Brother Wolf, to make peace between them and thee: to have thee amend thy behavior, and to have them forgive thee what is past, so that neither men nor dogs shall pursue thee more." When Saint Francis came to this, the wolf, by all that his body and his tail and his eyes could express, and by the motion of his head, showed that what Saint Francis proposed was agreeable to him, and that he wished to observe it. So Saint Francis continued: "My Brother Wolf, since it pleases thee to make and to keep this pact, I pledge myself to see that maintenance be provided thee, so long as thou shalt live, by the folk of Gubbio, and that thou canst

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never again suffer from hunger, for I know perfectly well that it was hunger which drove thee to do evil. And since I win for thee this grace, Brother Wolf, I ask thee to promise me that hereafter thou wilt harm neither man nor beast. Wilt thou not promise?" And the wolf nodded, and made it very plain that he did so promise. But Saint Francis said: "I would like thee, Brother Wolf, to stake thine honour on this promise, in order that I may thoroughly trust thee." And as Saint Francis held out his hand for a sign of good faith, the wolf raised his right forepaw, and amicably laid it in the hand of Saint Francis, thus passing to him, as best he could, his word of honour. Saint Francis concluded thus: "Now, Brother Wolf, I charge thee by the power of JESUS CHRIST to come with me, nothing doubting, and we will go

forth together and ratify this peace in the name of God." So the wolf obediently followed, as if he were the tamest of lambs; and the citizens were astounded to see. And the tidings of it spread quickly all over the place; and the whole populace, male and female, great and common, old and young, trooped into the market-place to get sight of the wolf with Saint Francis. And when they had all gathered together, Saint Francis rose up, and began to preach to them, saying, among other things: "Because of your sins doth God sometimes permit a plague like this. How much worse and more dangerous are the flames, which, for the lost, must eternally endure, than the fury of a wolf, which can threaten only the body! What should be our dread of the mouth of hell, when so great a multitude can regard with fear and trembling

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the jaws of one little animal ! Turn, then, my beloved, unto God, and do fitting penance for your transgressions, and He shall deliver you from the wolf to-day, and to-morrow from the infernal fire." Having ended his sermon, Saint Francis said : " Listen, my brethren. Our brother, the wolf, who is here before you, has avowed himself ready, and has given me his word of honour upon it, to establish a truce with you, and never in aught to molest you more ; and do you engage to supply him daily with whatever he needs ; and I will be his bondsman, that he will faithfully maintain his part of the treaty." So the people, with one voice, consented to feed him perpetually. And Saint Francis, before them all, appealed to the wolf : " Wilt thou keep the pact with these people, never to offend man nor beast nor

any other creature?" Whereupon the wolf knelt down, and inclined his head, and anew, by meek gesture of his body, and his ears and tail, proved, as well as he was able, that he meant to hold to his every agreement. Saint Francis added: "Brother Wolf, I desire that even as thou gavest me thy solemn promise outside the gates, thou shalt give it to me once again, here in public; nor bring to shame the oath and guarantee which I have offered for thee." Then the wolf upraised his right foot, and put it into the hand of Saint Francis. While this, and what has been already told, was going on, there was a tumult of joy and admiration among the spectators; and, elate with the devotedness shown by the saint, and the novel aspect of the miracle, and the truce of the wolf, they began to cry to Heaven, praising and blessing God, who had sent

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Saint Francis among them, who, by his offices, had freed them from the menace of the cruel brute. And the wolf himself afterwards lived two years in Gubbio, and went about sociably, visiting all doors, doing no wrong, nor having a wrong done to him; and he was courteously entertained by every one. And not a dog would so much as bark at him, as he wandered up and down the whole precinct, and in and out of the houses. And at the end of the two years Brother Wolf died of old age, and the citizens were all very sorry. For while they used to see him going so gently over the town, they were the oftener put in mind of the goodness and sweetness of Saint Francis.

These Fioretti di San Francesco are privately printed for Louise Imogen Guiney, who translated them out of the thirteenth-century Italian, for Herbert Copeland and F. H. Day and their friends. Christmas
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